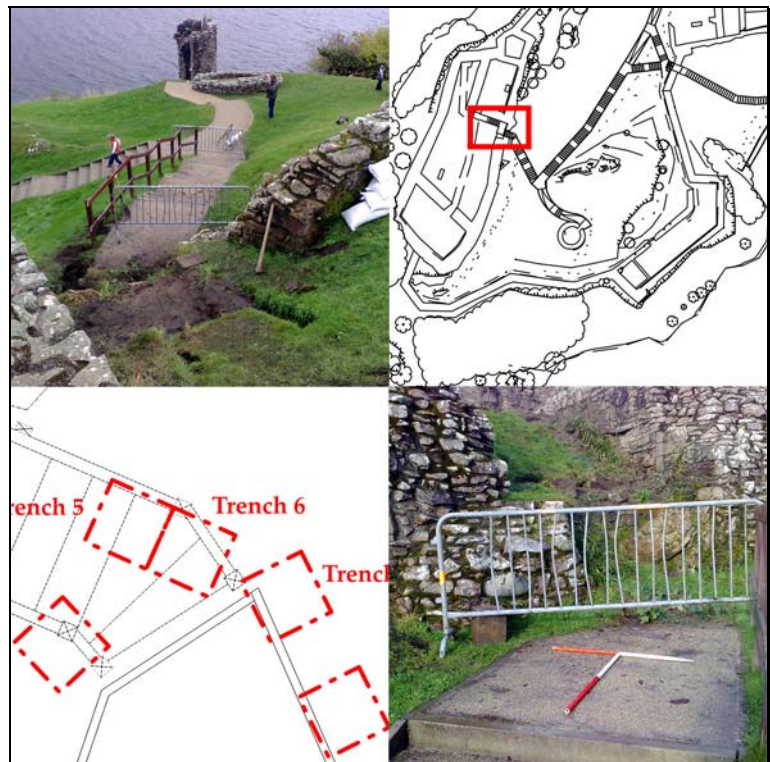


Historic Scotland  
Properties in Care  
Minor Archaeological Works 2008-9

# Urquhart Castle: Archaeological excavation, September 2009

HS PIC Index number: 90309  
Project code: HSCO-90309-2009-02



22 March 2010  
Kirkdale Archaeology

<b><u>Site</u></b>	Urquhart Castle
<b><u>N.G.R</u></b>	NH 5302 2856
<b><u>Project Description</u></b>	Archaeological excavation
<b><u>Project code</u></b>	HSCO-90309-2009-02

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*SUMMARY: A watching brief was carried out at Urquhart Castle during the excavation of nine small holes on the site of a proposed set of steps to replace the now removed wooden stairs leading up to the upper level of the motte.*

*There were no significant archaeological deposits or finds encountered. It seems this area has been disturbed at some point, most likely during previous archaeological excavations, the installation of the wooden steps and modern landscaping.*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Under the terms of its call-off contract with Historic Scotland, Kirkdale Archaeology was asked to maintain a watching brief during the excavation of nine small holes on the site of a proposed set of steps to replace the now removed wooden stairs leading up to the upper level of the motte.

The hand-excavated trenches were to allow concrete foundations to be poured to carry a staircase between these two portions of the castle. Four trenches had been dug previously under archaeological supervision in the same area (Kirkdale Archaeology Report HSCO-90309-2009-01).

The trenches were small, up to 500 mm x 500 mm x 450 mm deep and four were sighted on a steep slope next to the path on the summit while the remaining 5 were on the Service Close side of the wall separating the Close and the Summit. The Summit has been strongly suggested as both the site of an early Pictish stronghold and the site of the original 13<sup>th</sup>-century castle which once occupied this area. As such it could be considered an area of high archaeological potential, although the trenches revealed nothing of archaeological interest- the fills related to modern landscaping. Work carried out previously at the base of the slope at the water gate had shown that the castle had been given a massive face-lift in recent times with bases of sand and broken stone providing bedding for topsoil and turf to give the castle a smooth, groomed look to its slopes. This was shown to be the case as well on the slopes of the summit.

The work was carried out on the 28 September 2009

## 2.0

### DESCRIPTION

Trenches 1-4 were sited on the top of the sloped grassy area to the SE of the summit path.

Trench 1 was 300 mm deep to the SE x 400 mm deep to the NW. The trench was approximately 500 mm x 500 mm in plan. The turf **F101** 50 mm thick was removed and it overlay a layer of dark brown silty topsoil **F102** 300 mm thick resting on a base of broken angular pieces of sandstone **F103** - some with lichen on them, which showed that they had been exposed to the air until relatively recently. These represented the 20<sup>th</sup>-century landscaping of the monument. Topsoil **F102** had an angled cut **F104** running down through its upper portion from SE to NW. This was a cut to insert the various elements forming the summit path and was of recent construction. The path fill **F105** of ash and silt was edged with a wooden batten **F106**, the whole sitting on Terram **F107**. The cut was backfilled to the SE of the wooden batten with mid-brown silt **F108**.

300 mm down-slope was Trench 4, 250 mm deep to the SE x 350 mm deep to the NW. The trench was approximately 400 mm x 400 mm in plan. The turf **F401** 50 mm thick was removed and it overlay a dark brown silty topsoil **F402** 200 mm thick resting on a base of broken angular pieces of sandstone **F403** (exposed to 100 mm) - some with lichen on them, which again showed that they had been exposed to the air until relatively recently. These represented the 20<sup>th</sup>-century landscaping of the monument.

Trenches 2 and 3 lay 500 mm NE of Trenches 1 and 4. Trench 2 was 250 mm deep to the SE x 350 mm deep to the NW. The trench was approximately 400 mm x 400 mm in plan. The SW facing section had turf **F201** covering brick foundations **F202** (for bedding the slabbed stone hardstand at the NE end of the Summit Path) with a silt and grey grit backfill **F203** behind it forming the section. These relate to the very recent insertion of the path.

300 mm down-slope was Trench 3, 300 mm deep to the SE x 300 mm deep to the NW. The trench was approximately 400 mm x 400 mm in plan. The turf **F301** 50 mm thick was removed and it overlay a dark brown silty topsoil **F302** 200 mm thick resting on a base of broken angular pieces of sandstone **F303** (exposed to 50 mm).

These again relate to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century landscaping of the castle.

Trenches 5, 6 and 8 all shared the same characteristic combination of turf **F501**, **F601**, **F801**, topsoil **F502**, **F602**, **F802**, angular stone base **F503**, **F603**, **F803** and were approximately 400 mm x 400 mm in plan x 350 mm deep. The angular stone in the bases would provide a solid enough surface to build on.

Trench 7 was on the NE corner of the path leading N up from the Service Close. It was 400 mm x 400 mm in plan x 350 mm deep. The W section was composed of turf **F701**, the stone base **F702** and structural elements **F703** of this very recent path. Trench 9 was 100 mm deep, 400 mm x 400 mm in plan and encountered the concrete path banister foundation **F902** at this depth below the turf **F901**.

### **3.0 INTERPRETATION AND OBSERVATIONS**

The excavations did not uncover anything of archaeological significance, however the angular sandstone base layer appeared encountered in most of the trenches is interesting in itself. This may be a layer constituting material that had gathered as a result not only of the disintegration of the Summit building's walls but also due to deliberate stone robbing and shaping indicated by the varying size of the sandstone flakes and pieces. None of the stones were identified as having diagnostic dressing on them.

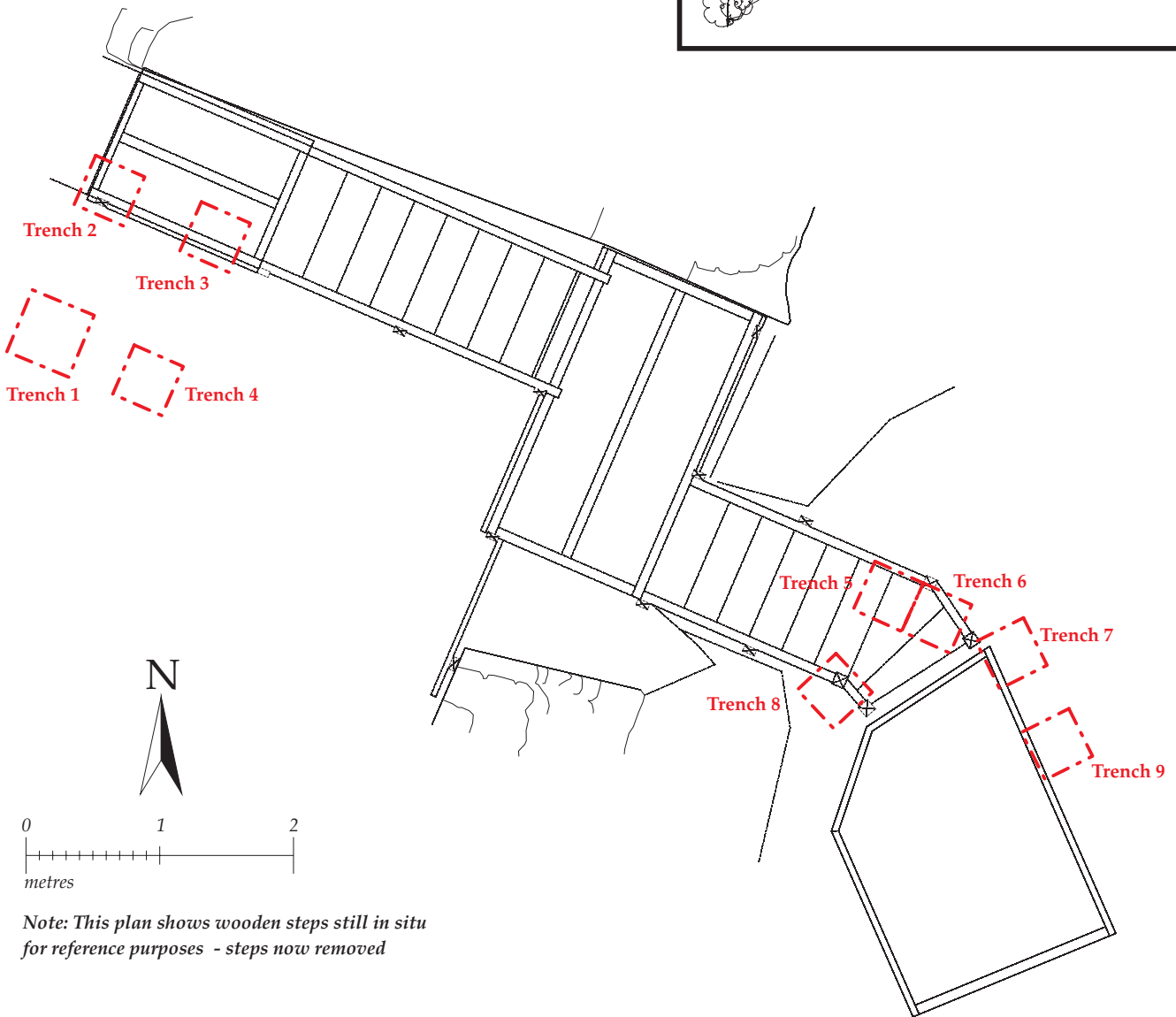
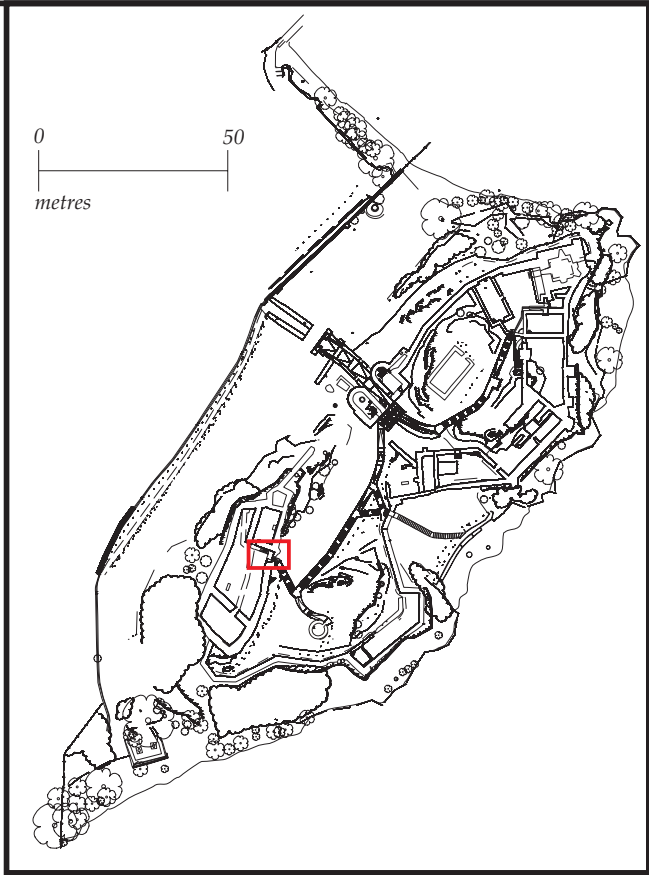
It appears then that the slope make-up is part of a tidying up exercise to make the castle more picturesque, most likely in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a leading tourist destination viewable from the Loch and known throughout the world, the castle has been thoroughly landscaped and maintained. The make-up and turfing of this slope is part of such an initiative.

Any future works that could see the removal of this layer and the exposure of the surfaces that it seals should have an archaeological watching brief attached so that an appropriate record of the buried horizons could be made.

#	Description
F101	Turf
F102	Mid Brown Silty Topsoil
F103	Base of Angular Sandstone
F104	Cut to Insert Path
F105	Silt and Ash Path Fill
F106	Wooden Batten for Path
F107	Terram
F108	Silty Backfill of F104
F201	Turf
F202	Brick Path Foundation
F203	Silty Grey Grit Backfill behind F202
F301	Turf
F302	Mid Brown Silty Topsoil
F303	Base of Angular Sandstone
F401	Turf
F402	Mid Brown Silty Topsoil
F403	Base of Angular Sandstone
F501	Turf
F502	Mid Brown Silty Topsoil
F503	Base of Angular Sandstone
F601	Turf
F602	Mid Brown Silty Topsoil
F603	Base of Angular Sandstone
F701	Turf
F702	Stone Path Base
F703	Path Elements
F801	Turf
F802	Mid Brown Silty Topsoil
F803	Base of Angular Sandstone
F901	Turf
F902	Concrete Foundation for Path rail Banister

## APPENDIX 2: PHOTOGRAPHIC REGISTER

#	Description	From	Date
1	Pre-Ex Shot looking NNW	SSE	28/9/2009
2	Pre-Ex Shot looking NNW	SSE	28/9/2009
3	Pre-Ex Shot looking NW	SE	28/9/2009
4	Pre-Ex Shot looking SE	NW	28/9/2009
5	Pre-Ex Shot looking NE	SW	28/9/2009
6	Pre-Ex Shot looking NNE	SSW	28/9/2009
7	Pre-Ex Shot looking N	S	28/9/2009
8	General Shot showing NE end of Summit path	SW	28/9/2009
9	Trench 1 NE-Facing Section	NE	28/9/2009
10	Trench 1 SE-Facing Section	NW	28/9/2009
11	Trench 2 SW-Facing Section	NE	28/9/2009
12	Trench 3 SW-Facing Section	NE	28/9/2009
13	Trenches 2 and 3 SW-Facing Sections	NE	28/9/2009
14	Trench 4 SW-Facing Section	NE	28/9/2009
15	Trench 1 NE-Facing Section	NE	28/9/2009
16	Trench 4 NE-Facing Section	NE	28/9/2009
17	Trenches 1 and 4 NE-Facing Sections	N	28/9/2009
18	Trenches 2 and 3 SW-Facing Sections	NE	28/9/2009
19	Trenches 2 and 3 looking SE	NW	28/9/2009
20	Trenches 1 and 4 looking SE	NW	28/9/2009
21	Trenches 1 and 4 looking W	E	28/9/2009
22	General Shot of Trenches 1-4 looking SSE	NNW	28/9/2009
23	Trench 8 (left) and Trenches 5 and 6 (joined, right) looking NW	SE	28/9/2009
24	Trenches 5 and 6 looking NNE	SSW	28/9/2009
25	Trench 8 looking NW	SE	28/9/2009
26	Trench 9 (left) and Trench 7 looking SSW	NNE	28/9/2009
27	Post-ex Shot looking S	N	28/9/2009
28	Post-ex Shot looking NW	SE	28/9/2009
29	Post-ex Shot looking NNE	SSW	28/9/2009
30	Post-ex Shot looking NW Up Summit Slope	SE	28/9/2009
31	General Shot looking S	N	28/9/2009
32	Trenches 1-4 looking SW	NE	28/9/2009



**Fig. 1 : Location plan**